

## Original Research Reports

# Constructing Work and Subjectivities in Precarious Conditions: Psycho-Discursive Practices in Young People's Interviews in Greece

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## Abstract

Precarity is becoming the paradigmatic description of young people's work conditions in crisis-ridden Greece, but also in other European countries. Focusing on interview data on the work experiences of young adults (18-26 years old), in urban centres of Greece, this study attempts to explore the ways in which informants account for working in precarious conditions and construct agency and subjectivity within these ways of accounting. The analysis drawing on insights from critical discursive social psychology indicates that participants construct precarious work conditions as widespread and banal a) by treating precarious work as a sine qua non condition of youth employment, b) by considering precarious work as an inherent trait of the Greek job-market, c) by considering precarious work as a necessary step on a (biographical) path leading to the desired and/or appropriate job, or d) by adopting a "there is no other alternative" accounting, representing precarious job conditions as the only alternative to unemployment. The analysis also points out the ways in which participants orient themselves to a dilemma of stake and accountability, being concerned to position themselves as effortful subjects, while they are rhetorically constructing the banal regime of precarious labour. The discussion considers the need to bring into the scope of social and political psychology the specific nuances of precarious labour.

**Keywords:** precarious work, banalisation, psycho-discursive practices, common-sense, neo-liberalism

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This paper aims at exploring the ways in which young people in Greece a) account for working in precarious conditions in an interview context and b) construct agency and subjectivity within these ways of accounting. Drawing on critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) the study attempts to reach the above objectives by casting light on both the discursive practices as well as on the ideological resources that are prominent in youth discourse on precarious employment in Greece.

## 'Precarity' and the Neo-Liberal Labour Regime of Precarious Employment in Greece

Several social theorists have asserted that in the last 30 years, with the advent of neoliberalism, a fundamental shift has taken place in how capitalism operates (e.g., Beck, 1992; Berardi, 2007, 2009; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2010; Duménil & Lévy, 2011; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Ross, 2009; Sennett, 2005). A lot of discussion in Europe – both at a theoretical and a social policy level – has been devoted to the new paradigm of 'precarity' documenting the shifting nature of the labour regime<sup>i</sup> in neo-liberal times: the flexibilisation of the work contract and the proliferation of employment practices and contract options (e.g., Gallie & Paugam, 2002; Letourneux, 1998; Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989; Standing, 2011, 2014).

'Precarity' is used in this study as an umbrella term to enclose the irregular conditions of work, like part-time employment, getting paid by the hour, temporary or short-term contracts, or shadow labour: in general, forms of employment diverging from the "standard employment relationship" which developed under the aegis of legislation or collective negotiation and agreement (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989). According to Barbier (2011), the word "precarity" or "precariousness" in reference to atypical or "non-standard" work conditions is a fairly recent neologism in the Anglo-Saxon academia of the social sciences. Nevertheless, the French debate on precarious labour in social policy and academia dates back to the 1970s (Schnapper, 1989). Precarity can hence be defined as "a cumulative combination of atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits, poor statutory entitlements, job insecurity, short tenure and low wages" (Lewchuk, de Wolff, King, & Polanyi, 2003, p. 23). Furthermore, Kalleberg (2009) puts emphasis on the distress produced by precarious work, when he defines it as "uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the part of the worker. Resulting distress, obvious in a variety of ways, reminds us daily of such precarity" (p. 2). To theorise this (more or less global) tendency, the political economist Standing (2011, 2014) has suggested that in times of global crisis, we witness the rise of a new global social class, the precariat.

Evidently, in times of crisis as experienced by Greece and Southern Europe in the recent years, the taken for granted financial conditions – such as secure employment, monthly salary, social insurance, savings schemes, personal investments – have changed, unbalancing the future for almost everyone. In said times, employment is getting more flexible and precarious for the workers. For instance, in a 2013 report by the Labour Inspectorate Force of the Greek Ministry Of Labour, evidence was provided on the rise of the percentage of uninsured (shadow) labour from 26% to 35% between 2010 and 2012 (Gatos, 2013). Further, statistics from the Insurance Inspectorate Force attested that one third of the inspected employees were employed without having a right to social/health insurance insurance.<sup>ii</sup> This is corroborated by publications that estimate that 40% of people worked in precarious labour/bad jobs (e.g., Mouriki, 2010). What is more, according to the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate had risen up to 22% in 2011, up to 25% in 2012, up to 27.2% as of January 2013 (Greek Statistics Agency, 2013).<sup>iii</sup> According to EUROSTAT data reported in local news,<sup>iv</sup> it was estimated that the percentage of unemployment for young people aged 15-24 in Greece exceeded 57%.

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insurance insurance.<sup>ii</sup> This is corroborated by publications that estimate that 40% of people worked in precarious labour/bad jobs (e.g., Mouriki, 2010). What is more, according to the Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate had risen up to 22% in 2011, up to 25% in 2012, up to 27.2% as of January 2013 (Greek Statistics Agency, 2013).<sup>iii</sup> According to EUROSTAT data reported in local news,<sup>iv</sup> it was estimated that the percentage of unemployment for young people aged 15-24 in Greece exceeded 57%.

Hence, in such turbulent times, it is evident that work patterns become increasingly fragmented, maximising employment vulnerability and its organisational and social consequences. Precarious employment is indeed becoming the norm. Such precarity has an impact not only on working conditions but also on people's subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) and agency (Gershon, 2011).

## 'Precarity' and Subjectivity in Neo-Liberal Times

Within the premises of the debate on neo-liberal (economic) policies in general, and precarity in particular, it is argued that neo-liberalism is necessarily accompanied by efforts to promote new conceptions of what it means to be an individual (Harvey, 2005, p. 42). People have to start engaging with (and perhaps performing) neo-liberal concepts of agency (Gershon, 2011) and forms of subjectivity (Sennett, 2000; Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010), built on the construction of neo-liberalism as common-sense (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). Scholars advance the argument that a shift has taken place in the psychic economy of the subjects in neo-liberalism (e.g., Dardot & Laval, 2014; Dejours, 1998, 2000; Deranty, 2008; Dufour, 2008; Melman & Lebrun, 2002). According to Gershon (2011), the concept of "self" is transformed into a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles: "this is a self that is produced through an engagement with a market, that is, neo-liberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances" (p. 539).

A similar argument was put forward by Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) in their account on the process of 'reflexive modernisation' and its consequences. According to this account individuals freed by traditional roles – including the traditional forms of work founded on routine, duty, and discipline – are repositioned through new forms of subjectivity and control. A typical feature of new control mechanisms is that they assign to individuals the duty to construct their own biographies in a 'do-it-yourself' mode (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The individualisation process which is at work requires people to act but also to account for their actions through recourse to the rhetoric of individual responsibility. Therefore, subjectivities promoted by neo-liberal (economic) policies are nested within a contradiction (between emancipation and exploitation) that Honneth (2004) depicts as the 'paradox of individualisation'. On the one hand, the destandardisation of work contents and forms allows room for greater personalisation and job enrichment. On the other hand, though, it also produces phenomena of work intensification which often invade both the private and social spheres of individuals (see also Gherardi & Murgia, 2013).

The discussion on new subjectivities constituted within the context of work flexibilisation and precarity has hardly affected the debates of social and political psychology, a project to which this paper aspires to contribute. Therefore, this study aims at exploring: a) the ways in which Greek youth account for working in precarious conditions and the common-place premises and values, i.e. the "lived ideologies" (Billig et al., 1988) that sustain and reproduce the regime of precarity; and b) issues of identity and agency elicited in the context of these accounts. In such an endeavour, a critical discursive social psychological approach (Bozatzis & Dragonas, 2013; Tuffin, 2005; Wetherell, 1998) was considered appropriate. This choice is predicated on its emphasis on everyday ideologies and their multifaceted nature that can help us shed light on the complex ways of understanding employment and constructing subjectivity and agency in precarious transitions.

## Psycho-Discursive Practices of Accounting for Work Experiences

“The starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and which has to be made ideologically coherent” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 421).

Critical discursive social psychology (Bozatzis, 2009; Bozatzis & Dragonas, 2013; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) aims at examining talk-in action, as processes of ideological reproduction in talk, as specific social practices, taking into consideration the fundamentally constructive and action-oriented nature of discourse (Potter, 2007). This approach stems from the dialogue between the fine-grained conversation analysis with the political-genealogical lens of post-structuralism (Wetherell, 1998). It provides researchers with analytic frames, concepts and a set of tools in order to conduct better analyses, focusing on both micro and macro contexts of discursive production. Specifically, such tools and concepts are: interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), subject positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; Wetherell, 1998); management of accountability in talk (Bozatzis, 2009); categories constructed in talk (Figgou & Condor, 2006); ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988), and psycho-discursive practices (Wetherell, 2007, 2008; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). According to Bozatzis (2009) critical discursive social psychological analyses “focus on ways in which historically constituted representations, implicated in power/knowledge nexuses, come to be mobilised within conversational contexts through speakers’ reflexive, vis-a-vis their accountability, rhetorical actions” (p. 435).

The debate on the criteria of evaluation for discursive and generally qualitative research has been elaborate and extensive (e.g., Lincoln, 1995; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Potter and Wetherell (1987) proposed an alternative framework of criteria for the validity of discursive research, based on a social constructionist (Gergen, 1985) and ‘epistemologically relativist’ (Potter, 1996) perspective. The first criterion lies in the coherence of the analytic claims vis-a-vis the body of discourse analysed, i.e. “analysis should let us see how the discourse fits together” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 170). Participants’ orientation is the second criterion of validation, as analytic claims should not diverge from the actual discourse of the participants. The creation of new problems and new questions, upon giving analytic answers, is the third criterion advanced by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Finally, the fruitfulness of the analysis, to generate novel explanations, to make sense of new kinds of discourse in a field of research is the fourth criterion proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Such criteria nevertheless do not address the issue of generalisation of the analytic claims of discursive research. Goodman (2008) remarks that there are elements of discursive research pertaining to generalisability which reflect the context-rich and ideological nature of language. He suggests that discourse analytic findings can be considered generalisable once they can demonstrate how a specific rhetorical strategy will often bring about the same interactional accomplishments (Goodman, 2008).

Through this methodological perspective we address the question of how young people in Greece speak about their first work experiences in precarious conditions, elicited in the context of interview. In this effort, analytic focus is placed on how the informants employ psycho-discursive practices (Wetherell, 2007, 2008; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) to construct their agency and identity while accounting for the precarious jobs they have been employed.

Accountability is a routine feature of interaction (Edwards & Potter, 1992), since speakers ordinarily deal with issues of agency and responsibility when offering reports of events. Thus, accounting and accountability are pertinent in the research interview as a local interactional context for the description of work and the construction of the self. This is the context where informants employ psycho-discursive practices. This concept is defined as “recognisable, conventional, collective and social procedures through which character, self, identity, the psychological, the emotional, motives, intentions and beliefs are performed, formulated and constituted. Psycho-discursive

practices are those which among the sum of social practices constitute a psychology, formulate a mental life and have consequences for the formation and representation of the person” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 668).

The founding argument advanced overall in this paper is that specificities of the employment relationship have changed to a great extent in the recent years, due to the crisis and the precarisation of the work regime (Castel, 2002). The discursive analytic approach to social and political psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998) could prove fruitful in the study of such a shift, exploring constructions of identity and precarious work, as specific, generalisable discursive practices and strategies, i.e. as regularities across a sample of participants in a study, embedded in the macro social and political context.

## Research Design and Analytic Lens

### Participants and Interviews

For the purposes of this project, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults, 18-27 years old. The interviews were conducted by the first author of this article in the years 2010-2012, the early years of the 'Greek turbulence'. Hence, 21 native Greeks and 19 second generation immigrants<sup>v</sup> were interviewed. All of the participants were living in urban areas of Greece, most of them in the capital city of Athens. They were high school graduates in Greece and most of them had higher education (i.e. university or college degree). The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted about 1h and 30min. Interviewees were reached through personal contacts, then by snowball sampling, using their social networks, acquaintances and family ties.

The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions structured in three sections. The first section involved questions on the socio-economic background of the participant, the origin and structure of the family, the school and higher education years. The second part involved questions on participants' work experiences, starting with the earlier ones and proceeding to the latest. Questions concerned the period of employment, the way the job was found, the sum of pay, insurance and the reason for the termination of the employment. Finally, the last section revolved around the projected future, inquiring on aspirations and future plans. All interviews were fully transcribed by the first author, focusing on the reproduction of content.

### Analytic Procedure

The first stage of the initial data analysis, conducted in Greek, involved the selection of manageable chunks (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and passages from the transcripts (in the original Greek language), according to thematic similarities and relevance with the research questions. The second stage, which provided the extracts for this paper, was organised around the search for regularities, recurring broad patterns and lines of argument (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). The interview as a method of data elicitation, as a specific dialogic interaction (Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Tanggaard, 2009), provided the local context, which enabled specific accounts, categorisations and evaluations (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004; Potter, 1998) regarding precarious work. It was inferred that jointly the participant and the interviewer performed the constructions of precarious labour in this local context of the interview, drawing on shared resources, shared knowledge (Edwards, 1997) regarding the conditions of the labour market. In such an effect, particular analytic effort was put in order to be reflexively mindful (Georgaka, 2003) of the power asymmetry in the interview, i.e. to be reflexive regarding the imposition of researcher's concerns and socio-cultural positioning<sup>vi</sup> (Billig, 2003). This step then identified the patterns of accounting in the local interview

context. As a next step of analysis, the identified regularities in the interview were contextualised hermeneutically in the macro level, drawing on relevant discursive studies as well as social and political theory. The final step involved the production of the analytic arguments, in an accessible report of findings, contending that their intelligibility and trustworthiness is indicative of their robustness and transferability outside of the interview contexts (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

It needs to be mentioned that the wording of the extracts in Greek was translated in English by the first author after the analysis, then corroborated by the other two authors. Temple and Young (2004) suggest that the act of translation needs to be identified, while the role of the researcher/translator of the findings is inextricably bound to the socio-cultural positioning of the researcher. Hence, the act of translation of findings has been fruitful for the researcher/translator/author in order to reflexively discuss issues of meaning in the extracts.

## Analysis

The analysis indicated four common-place ways of accounting for working in precarious conditions in participants' discourse. According to the first one, participants construct precarious work as a sine-qua-non condition of youth employment. According to the second, participants frame it as a necessary step on a personal and biographical path leading to the desired and/or appropriate job. The third way represents precarious work as an inherent trait of the Greek job market. Finally, the fourth way, through recourse to a "there is no alternative" (TINA) trope, represents precarious job conditions as the only alternative to unemployment.

### A) Precarious Work as a Sine-Qua-Non Condition of Youth Employment

In Extract 1, Iason (25 years old, Greek origin), discusses his teenage summer job in a family-owned country restaurant.

Extract 1

*"When you are a kid things are like a bit happy-go-lucky"*

- 
- 1 G: Yes, I see. What about tiredness?  
 2 I: Eeh, I didn't mind about it as long as I can remember, say, I don't know, because maybe  
 3 we hadn't realised some things, to be honest, it was more fun, OK, I saw it always, I saw  
 4 this relationship as helping my parents.  
 5 G: When you said you realise some things, what do you mean, why did you say that?  
 6 I: Eeeh, 'cause when you are like, younger, you are without a clue, while, say, when you  
 7 grow up, and seeing that, when you have to work, the kind of jobs you have to do, how  
 8 much you have to repress yourself, when you start to judge by yourself the relation you  
 9 have with the bosses, you see how they treat you and so on, you realise much more things  
 10 as a grown-up, while when you are a kid things are like a bit happy-go-lucky, maybe, you  
 11 know, you go to work, I take my pocket-money, I smile all the time, I am in the mood, I  
 12 am a kid or something, maybe you go on a little less consciously sometimes, while when  
 13 you grow up it is definitely different while you start to gain some experience.
- 

The interviewer's previous questions to Iason revolved around his work schedule and around the ways of spending his earnings from this job. In this turn the interviewer is concerned with the issue of tiredness. Iason articulates a

positive assessment (I.2, 3: “I didn’t mind about it”; “it was more fun”) of this teenage, summer job, while he also brings up the subject of “realisation”. He justifies this positive assessment based on the work relationship, which he categorises as helping, supporting his parents in this family business (I.4: “I saw this relationship as helping my parents”).

In the next turn, when the interviewer puts forward again the subject of realisation and asks for further explanations, Iason articulates a justificatory argument that revolves around a chronological dichotomy of the self to a “younger” and an older (working) person. Iason attributes to youth the descriptive attribute of “not having a clue” (I.6), the psychological trait of not being distrustful and suspicious. On the contrary, when the person grows older, there is a psychological shift which involves realisation of “much more things” (I.9). In fact, this is an instance when he mobilises the interpretative repertoire we have named “life’s course”, emphasising the distinct stages and shifts of personal realisation in a life course: a jolly young person when working, gains experiences, and progressively s/he changes and becomes wiser. Hence, Iason attributes to the teenage/young worker a psychological trait, the (constant) smile, the (positive) outlook, in contrast (“it is definitely different”, as he states in I.13) to the older worker, who has had to endure the repression and has gained experiences through years of work.

The term used to refer to the money gained further indicates the dichotomy between younger/teenage and older workers. “Pocket-money”<sup>vii</sup> (in I.11) is a common category of lower pay, a common-place discursive resource mobilised by Iason in order to denominate the dependent work relationship with his parents as well as to distinguish rhetorically this teen-job from other later jobs. In fact, the framing of youth employment wages as “pocket-money” is a key analytic finding, as used by the informants in order to pinpoint both the lower sum paid in youth employment, as well as its small importance in their lives. It is a notion indicative of the normalisation and banalisation (Dejours, 1998) of precarious work, as a sine-qua-non condition, a lived ideology (Billig, 1995) in the Greek labour regime.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, this extract is a first instance of the mobilisation of the repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) named “life’s course”, in order to articulate a path of self-realisation, through the accumulation of experiences. In the next extract, Dennis (25 years old, of Albanian origin) is constructing the same condition for agency and youth employment.

#### Extract 2

*“Insurance... as if!”*

- 
- 1 G: Yes, yes, I understand... ehh, so then, I mean there, did you help or did you  
2 master the craft, let's say... how much did you take?
- 3 D: You cannot claim to master in 3 months, ha.
- 4 G: I imagine.
- 5 D: I was mostly helping because I was very young, so you know, they had me for  
6 the petty work, the errands, say, get me this and do the other thing.
- 7 G: And you told me you had to work long hours.
- 8 D: Yes quite a lot.
- 9 G: A lot of tiredness.
- 10 D: Yeess... don't mention it. That's why I am telling you I took an example from  
11 there and I told myself I won't be doing this thing for a lifetime, heheh. I was  
12 horrified, mind you.
- 13 G: You were horrified, ehh., tell me something, the money.
- 14 D: Eeh, look, if I remember correctly it was five thousand [drachmas].
- 15 G: Daily wage?

- 16 D: Yes.
- 17 G: No matter how many hours you were working?
- 18 D: Nothing, no insurance... as if!<sup>k</sup>
- 19 G: Yes, you were a kid then.
- 20 D: Ehhh, I was 15 years old.
- 

In the first instance, the interviewer is mobilising the dichotomy of the younger/teenage worker by enquiring on the job description (l.1: “did you help there or did you master the craft”), prompting him to follow this course: as “very young” (l.5) worker, he had an assistant's role. This is indicative of a shared knowledge (Edwards, 1997), a common sense (Billig, 1987): teenagers are helpers in this kind of jobs, they don't have a central role. In this role, Dennis minds to articulate an 'effortful' (Gibson, 2009, 2011) subject position, by stressing that “they had me for the petty work, the errands, say, get me this and do the other thing” (l.5-6), “I was horrified, mind you” (l.11). As a consequence, he can describe a form of realisation from this experience (l.10: “I took an example from there”), which culminates in taking up the agentic decision to decide on his future: “I won't be doing this thing for a lifetime” (l.11). Dennis, in this extract, accounts for his subsequent choice without though rhetorically including himself explicitly in the second generation group.<sup>x</sup> This account of accumulating experiences and changing constructs an identity of resilience and effort for better conditions.

Moreover, of analytic interest here is the discursive articulation of precarity as a *sine-qua-non* feature of the labour market. When I enquire on the issue of the daily wage in relation with the working hours, Dennis is quick to declare: “Nothing, no insurance... as if!” (l.17). This idiomatic expression in Greek indicates that providing insurance to a teenage worker is out of the common-sense of the labour market. He is thus 'flagging the flag' (Billig, 1995), in a spectacular way, of the banality of the precarious work regime. But, reflexively, I have to point out that I am also 'saluting this flag', once I positively recognise (l.18: “Yes, you were a kid then”) this sine-qua-non condition, that a youngster cannot receive insurance; I am also recognising as banal and common-sense this dichotomy between younger and older workers.

Hence, through the reflexive rhetorical analysis of this extract, it is evident that the interviewer and the interviewee pinpoint the common-sense, joint construction (through their shared knowledge) of precarity as a sine-qua-non condition of youth employment, as a banal regime of youth work. Moreover, in the interaction of accounting, through the banal dichotomisation of the younger/older workers, Dennis is positioning himself as an effortful subject, by articulating his agency, and explaining the rationale of his decisions, mobilising the repertoire of the “life-course”, indicated also in the first extract. This psycho-discursive practice, whence the rhetorical dichotomy of younger vs. older worker is a resource, effectively sets the person's actions in a biographical perspective of agency and realization, as discussed in the following set of extracts.

## **B) Precarious Work as a Necessary Step on a (Biographical) Path Leading to the Desired and/or Appropriate Job**

In the following extract, Daniel (24 years old, of Georgian origin) is asked to explain the meaning of 'stability' for him, since he had previously articulated a dichotomy between stable and unstable work in his account. Thus, he elaborates on the construction of this (biographical) path, from one job to the next.



## Extract 3

*"There is no such thing. For me."*

- 
- 1 G: Basically I want you to tell me, I mean, this stability, what-what does it mean, what  
2 do you make of it?
- 3 D: Stable work?
- 4 G: Yes
- 5 [7s of pause]
- 6 D: I know, but I believe that  
7 [2s pause, he exhales sarcastically]  
8 there is no such thing. For me.
- 9 G: For you individually, personally for you?
- 10 D: Yes, yes, Because whatever I may do, I mean stable, that I looked at, it was this, the  
11 pastry shop that I wanted to do for 2 years... but not longer. I wanted to do for 2  
12 years, to finish also the
- 13 G: school
- 14 D: and the cooking (classes). And I will be there, that is, I will have, a perfect CV. And  
15 let me work myself to death, just I will have the... very good CV.
- 16 G: Mhm.
- 17 D: and let those 2 years of my life pass, without remembering any of them. Without  
18 having anything to remember.
- 19 G: After those 2 years?
- 20 D: After those 2 years things would have been easier, but, I believe that after 2 years,  
21 since... I lasted doing something, for 2 years to myself, I believe that I would endure  
22 doing something, for more ... 10 years, to be able to look up and have new dreams,  
23 that instead of being paid 1300 euros, to be paid 5000 euros per month, becoming a  
24 super chef, in charge of, I don't know what. Because these things, I mean one thing  
25 leads to another. It depends also on your point of view. I mean, if you stand and argue  
26 that the damage in the back, it was good for you to get it, because you had to take a  
27 smacking to get yourself together... that is good. But up to that point, I mean... you  
28 don't need anything else.
- 

After the interviewer's question on stability and a long pause (7s), Daniel replies sarcastically "there is no such thing. For me" (l.8). He appoints a 2-years horizon to stable employment, in parallel to the cooking classes he was attending. Effectively, he is accounting by categorising the accumulation of work experiences in a "perfect CV", a "very good CV" (l.15) as the end of precarious work, in order to build a pathway to a career. Again, the repertoire of "life's course" is mobilised in this instance, in order to frame the construction of a path to a desired job. Daniel constructs his agency as willing to disregard the weariness of those 2 years (l.15-18: "let me work myself to death", "let those 2 years of my life pass, without remembering any of them. Without having anything to remember"). This in an instance where the 'effortfulness' repertoire (Gibson, 2009, 2011) is mobilised, so as to construct his individual effort to build a CV, setting as a first necessary step a precarious job, in order to attain a better (precarious) job in the foreseeable future.

When the interviewer moves on to enquire on this time limit of 2 years of stability after this period of precarity/training, Daniel states initially that "things would have been easier" (l.20), but then he is adjusting the time limit of his endurance to 10 years. He positions himself again as an 'effortful' subject, who can "endure", aiming at "new dreams" (l.22) of a much bigger salary and a better work position (l.24: "super-chef, in charge of I don't know what"). The rationale underlying this effort is: "one thing leads to another" (l.24-25); one job leads to the next, in the build-up

of a good CV. In this perspective, Daniel is also bringing forth the accumulation of experiences when referring to a grave injury he had on his back, for lifting too much weight in this pastry shop. He embeds the experience of this injury in a rationale of justification (l.26: “it was good of you to get it”) because he had to grow up, to become mature and realistic (l.26-27: “you had to take a smacking to get yourself together”) in this life-course. The use of this vibrant image, of the smacking as a metaphor for the injury sustained by work, is drawn from a culturally shared resource, i.e. that an extreme experience, such as a beating, can wake up a person, make one “get together”, adhere to the same common-sense everyone takes for granted. Daniel is in fact asserting the necessity of precarious and difficult work, as a step in the effort to attain a “good job”, in the person's life course.

In this extract Daniel overall constructs the importance of personal investment to attaining a “good job”, in a biographical perspective of accumulation of work experiences. Rhetorically, he connects the personal work effort, despite all difficulties, such as precarity, to a future time horizon of 2 and 10 years, as the individual tries to achieve the “good job”. In his utterances he constructs the notion of ‘work’ as a constellation of consecutive precarious jobs, in the life-course of an individual, who strives to attain the desired and/or appropriate job. The individual's agency, as indicated in this extract, is linked with the effort, the personal responsibility, and the endurance vis-à-vis the labour market competition.

### C) Precarious Work as an Inherent Trait of the Greek Job-Market

The next extract is typical of another discursive practice employed by the participants working rhetorically towards the banalisation of precarious labour regime. This practice involves the employment of the stereotypical representation of Greece (and Greeks) in general and the Greek labour market in particular as par excellence disorganised (Bozatzis, 1999). In the extract, Alexis, a 26 years old guy from Greece who has studied economics and applied arts, categorises one of his first jobs as “classic Greek”. While accounting, he also mobilises the ‘effortfulness repertoire’ (Gibson, 2009, 2011) so as to position himself as an effortful, hard-working citizen in the “classic Greek” precarious labour regime.

Extract 4

*“Classic Greek Job”*

- 
- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | G: What was the fixed salary on which you agreed?  |
| 2  | A: 700 Euros per month, 750...   |
| 3  | G: On 8-hour shifts?   |
| 4  | A: Supposedly it was 8-hour shifts, shop hours, on Monday and Wednesday I think          |
| 5  | you left earlier, on Tuesday – Thursday – Friday later... and on Saturday, every         |
| 6  | second Saturday I worked there.  |
| 7  | G: So, was this something like printing?   |
| 8  | A: Graphic designer on the computer, I was upstairs... now... I also did printing, I was |
| 9  | on a rush, I also put up posters, I did everything. Whatever the boss told you was       |
| 10 | this job. Classic Greek job. But a nice job, the atmosphere in there was very good.      |
| 11 | We also hung out with the guys, all together as a bunch, the whole office was 4          |
| 12 | persons.   |
- 

The topic of discussion is one of his first full-time jobs as a graphic designer, in a print shop of Athens. Alexis is orientating himself towards accounting for his monthly wage, by effectively attributing the characterisation of “Classic Greek job” (l.10) to that particular job. This characterisation is an instance of a common-place (Billig et

al., 1988), as we share the understanding (Edwards, 2004) of what means a 'classic Greek job', to which the interviewer gravitates by not prompting him for explanations. It is also a self-stereotyping description (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), when the common-place of lack of organisation and control (Bozatzis, 1999; Herzfeld, 1987), as an inherent trait of the labour market, is culturally (and mutually) understood as an attribute of something which is "classic Greek". In fact, it can be argued that Alexis is mobilising this common place resource, in order to account for leaving this workplace. Thus, precarity as a regime of work is performed through the attribution of inherent characteristic qualities to the Greek labour market, evidenced by that particular workplace.<sup>xi</sup>

Moreover, Alexis inoculates himself (Potter, 1996) against the common characteristic of these extracts, the stake of being called idle, by using an external attribution. Through that rhetorical strategy he is effectively casting the blame of the precarious work conditions (that finally led him to quit) to the boss of that workplace (I.9: "whatever the boss told you was this job"). In order to render this attribution rhetorically convincing he has to draw on the repertoire of effortfulness (Gibson, 2009, 2011), describing in detail his work duties in a list (I.4-6, I.8-10). He is thus positioning himself as an effortful subject, a person who is working hard, facing the banal regime of precarious labour. Interestingly though, in his next enunciation, Alexis articulates a positive assessment of this job (I.10: 'nice job'), based on the atmosphere of the workplace. The camaraderie, lads hanging-out after work, are mentioned as positive characteristics of that job. Nonetheless, this categorisation of the Greek labour market amidst the precarious labour regime is not the most grave.

## D) Precarious Work as the Only Alternative to Unemployment

In the final extract, Dimitra (25 years old, of Albanian origin), when asked to discuss her employment in a technology magazine, also constructs exploitation and disorganisation as typical of the Greek labour market, though in a different way.

Extract 5

*"It's a Catch-22"*

- 
- 1 G: So, did you write under different names?
- 2 D: No, no under the same. Since... OK, supposedly we were, fine, over there... I mean how
- 3 much exploitation you can find in the magazines... and the press is a fence-less
- 4 vineyard, whatever, whatever, no one monitors anything, nothing. Say, I remember
- 5 that people were working in there, where he had them on 4-hour contracts, he had
- 6 everybody on 4-hour contracts, nobody was insured, nobody, and he had them and they
- 7 were working and they had to put out this, let's say, they had to put out a lot of work.
- 8 G: The magazine
- 9 D: Of course. Because imagine 3 persons, 4, they were publishing a monthly magazine,
- 10 which was a thing like that [demonstrates size using her hands]
- 11 G: Yes, yes, I imagine, I know how huge they are, those tech magazines
- 12 D: And it was, OK, you could see, my friend, the exploitation and you couldn't say a thing,
- 13 because you know that out there there is too much unemployment, I mean OK you
- 14 could leave or tell him "You know what? You don't pay me, you don't give me..." so
- 15 you told him and what? You will be left unemployed, completely. In front of you there is
- 16 the cliff, behind you there is the stream, you can't, either you accept to play by the rules
- 17 the others set, people who can set them or you don't play at all, you have to choose.
-

Dimitra uses an emphatic expression (l.2-3: “I mean how much exploitation you can find in the magazines”) in order to articulate her argument on this issue, which is framed by the metaphor “fence-less vineyard”.<sup>xii</sup> This metaphor, particular in Greek, is a common-place expression indicative of a non-controlled setting. Just like Alexis in the previous extract, Dimitra draws then from a shared resource in order to illustrate the lack of protective legislation and control mechanisms. Moreover, she repeats the general expression “whatever, whatever” (l.4), commonly indicative of the speaker's negative assessment of the referred situation. In fact, she elaborates further on that assessment, by adding an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) in line 4: “no one monitors anything, nothing”. There is a stake of accountability (Edwards & Potter, 1992) here, since she needs to rhetorically back up her accusations and claims on that workplace, so that she is not characterised as prejudiced. She provides the reasoning by constructing a memory account of the working conditions (l.4: “let's say I remember”), in order to attribute the blame to the owner of the magazine for the work conditions of precarity (l.5: “here he had them on 4-hour contracts, he had everybody on 4-hour contracts”). Dimitra is mobilising the repertoire of 'effortfulness' (e.g., in l.5,7: “people were working in there”, “they were working... a lot of work”), in order to contrast hard work on the part of the employees with the precarious work conditions imposed by the employer. With this contrast she cements her external attribution of blame. An attribution that she emphasizes more in lines 9-10, drawing again on the effortfulness of her colleagues: “Because imagine 3 persons, 4, they were publishing a monthly magazine, which was a thing like that [demonstrates size using her hands]”. She has effectively positioned her colleagues (and probably herself) as effortful employees and has constructed the precarious conditions of work in that magazine as a banal regime, not controlled by anyone.

In her next enunciation, she moves on to construct a psycho-discursive practice of banalisation (Dejours, 1998), by attributing to the labour regime the explicit assessment of “exploitation” (l.12). It is an exploitation that even though is visible by the person (“you could see”), it is ineffable (“you couldn't say a thing”), because “out there is too much unemployment” (l.13). The use of the second person implies the generalisation of this exploitation, implying that it is not just an exception in this workplace; it is a generalised, banal work regime, instantiated in the interview by a psycho-discursive practice, which attests to the agency of the speaker. The existence of unemployment in the labour market is offered as an explanation for the acceptance by the employees of the precarious work conditions. Hence, the employee is justified rhetorically to work in silence, instead of speaking up and taking action. Dimitra is using direct speech (l.14: “You know what? ... you don't give me...”), in order to illustrate her personal report which leads to the conclusion: “You will be left unemployed, completely” (l.15). Thus she constructs a position for herself and her colleagues in that magazine as people unable to act, to speak up, or else they will be left unemployed. That is, she places the responsibility of acting for the improvement of their conditions on herself and her colleagues, taking it away from her employer. This is, in effect, the banalisation of suffering, in the regime of precarious work, according to Dejours (1998): suffering from work becomes ineffable, since it is banal, common-place.

Dimitra is using a common idiomatic metaphor in order to describe this regime, as “in front of you there is the cliff, behind you there is the stream” (l.15-16). This expression<sup>xiii</sup> conveys the metaphoric meaning of a dead-end, as a spatial metaphor of the precarious labour regime. In order to rhetorically justify this characterisation, she is constructing an “us and them” (Billig, 1995) dilemma, positioning herself on the “us” side: on the one side there is the exploitation of precarious labour, on the other side the unemployment; “you have to choose” on which side you accept to play, “or you don't play at all” (l.17). In contrast, she positions the other side, “the others”, as people who can set the rules to that game. All in all, she attributes the agency of “setting the rules” of the regime of precarity to the “others”, the bosses or the system, trying to argue effectively for herself and her colleagues against

the stake of passivity, of doing nothing. In that way, she constructs a subject position for herself and her colleagues as unable to act or to speak up, in a precarious labour regime which impels them only to work with effort. This positioning in a binary dichotomy of “us and them” is indicative of the dilemmatic construction of the labour market as performed in this local context by the informants: in or out, precarious work or unemployment and exclusion. Precarious work is constructed then as the only alternative to unemployment, in a *'there is no alternative'* (TINA) rhetoric. But this is also another instance of the psycho-discursive practices mobilised in the accounting of the informants: a common analytic theme where the agency of the person is attested by hard work, marked by the rhetorical use of the repertoire of effortfulness (Gibson, 2009, 2011). Thus, a subject position of an effortful citizen (Gibson, 2009, 2011) is articulated, in a neo-liberal labour regime of precarity, which is constructed as banal, commonsensical.

## Concluding Remarks

This paper focused on the ways in which precarious work conditions were constructed in youth interview discourse in Greece. We indicated four common-place lines of argument that represented precarity in various and potentially contradictory ways. Hence, working in precarious conditions was represented as a sine-qua-non characteristic of the Greek job market and as the only option available to Greek youth, the only alternative to unemployment. However, precarity was not only constructed as a constraint imposed on individuals by supposedly inherent (e.g., disorganization) or historically specific (e.g., fiscal crisis) traits of Greek economy. It was also depicted as a natural, sine-qua-non condition of youth employment and as a necessary step on a (biographical) succession of jobs leading to the desired and/or appropriate job and self-fulfilment.

Notwithstanding the various ways in which precarity is represented, precarious employment is constructed as a banal regime (Billig, 1995) of the Greek society. We suggest that precarious labour is not seen by our respondents as the exception, but as a common sense<sup>xiv</sup> (Hall & O'Shea, 2013), a common place in the labour market and a way of life in the neo-liberal society (Billig et al., 1988). It is represented in Eagleton's (1991) terms as a pattern of belief and practice, which makes existing social arrangements appear 'natural' or inevitable. The construction of this regime is important in the debates of social and political psychology.

Interestingly, our young participants were concerned to construct themselves as effortful and resilient individuals while they were rhetorically constructing the banal regime of precarious labour. In other words, they were concerned to position themselves as active entrepreneurs of their biographical/employment projects, even when they portrayed themselves as constrained by the lack of the necessary resources to pursue their objectives and to fulfil these projects. Gibson (2009, 2011) argues that the significance of the mobilisation of the trope of effortfulness in the act of accounting lies in the common sense assumption of individual responsibility for 'making an effort', despite societal conditions, i.e. the labour market and the youth regime of precarious work. It is a psycho-discursive practice evident of the social process of individuation, according to Beck (1992) and Rose (1999). The mobilisation of this culturally accessible resource suggests that ordinary social actors, such as young adults grown up in Greece, have culturally entrenched those norms of individual responsibility. They position themselves as effortful citizens in advanced liberalism (Rose, 1999), drawing on a discourse of personal freedom, unlimited individual potential and entrepreneurialism amidst the constellation of precarious jobs offered in a period of turbulence. As Rose (1999) argues, in advanced liberalism the passive citizen of the welfare state becomes an active citizen with rights, responsibilities and expectations; an active entrepreneur of the self, since “citizenship becomes con-

ditional upon conduct” (Rose, 1999, p. 267). Furthermore, for those excluded from citizenship “control is now to operate through the rational reconstruction of the will” (p. 270). This reconstruction of the will is demonstrated through the mobilization of the trope of effortfulness. The ideological function of such a trope of accounting is to predicate social citizenship rights on individual psychology, or to legitimise the attribution of social citizenship as being the result of a liberal, fair system which rewards individual ‘effort’ and punishes ‘laziness’ (Gibson, 2009). On this issue, we have to take into consideration that half of the informants were members of the second generation, most of whom at the time of the interviews were not, and still are not, officially Greek citizens. The immigrant background and the limbo status of the second generation in the Greek society are definitely very interesting issues in terms of their impact on discursive concerns of moral accountability, nevertheless, we have chosen not to focus on them in this study, as the argument advanced by the extracts concerns young people living and working in contemporary Greece in general.

As for every discursive and qualitative study, every caution should be applied to validity and generalisability of its findings. On the other side, the banal regime of precarity seems to have become a common Southern-European reality in the macro context (e.g., Mattoni & Vogiatzoglou, 2014), in the midst of social crisis. Hence, we suggest that the ways of accounting and the psycho-discursive practices indicated can be generalised and/or transferred in other similar socio-political settings, once they can be reflexively recognised as common-place in the micro-context of interaction. The questions of precarity as exclusion of the young, of the emergence of the precariat as a new social class are pressing political concerns in Europe, of relevance to the discipline of social and political psychology. More discursive research is definitely needed on the situated talk-in-action of the precariously employed in their actual spaces of debate, labour and struggle, as well as on the identification of the ways in which the social and historically available discursive resources of effortfulness, hard-work, responsibility, and individualism are articulated in regards to the self. Moreover, further research is needed on the quantitative documentation of the European emergence of precarious labour as a labour regime.

## Notes

i) The notion of ‘regime’ is employed to refer to conditions of precarious work in order to set its prevalence in neo-liberal times of crisis. Walthers (2006) states that the notion of ‘regime’ “relates to existing institutional settings that have a history structured not only by conflicts and the interest of specific social actors but also by the set of values and interpretations which they constantly reproduce. Institutions and concepts merge into what is conceived of as a ‘normal’ in a given context, which also includes a ‘normal’ relation between individual entitlements and collective demands. Herein, cultural and social patterns are also concerned with influencing individuals’ biographical orientations” (p. 124).

ii) In real numbers, that is 2.362 out of 6.135. Data retrieved from the website of the Foundation of Social Security (IKA in Greek) April 17, 2013, from <http://www.ika.gr/gr/infopages/press/20130417.cfm>

iii) Data provided in a press release of the Greek Statistics Agency. Retrieved April 17, 2013 from [https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.statistics.gr%2Fportal%2Fpage%2Fportal%2FESYE%2FBUCKET%2FA0101%2FPressReleases%2FA0101\\_SJO02\\_DT\\_MM\\_01\\_2013\\_01\\_F\\_GR.pdf](https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.statistics.gr%2Fportal%2Fpage%2Fportal%2FESYE%2FBUCKET%2FA0101%2FPressReleases%2FA0101_SJO02_DT_MM_01_2013_01_F_GR.pdf)

iv) For instance, in Greek: “First Place in Europe for Greek unemployment amounting to 26,8%”. Retrieved June 1, 2013 from <http://news.in.gr/economy/article/?aid=1231233351>

v) According to the definition by Portes and Rumbaut (2005), “a second generation immigrant is someone who lives in the host country for the last 5 years, has immigrated prior to adolescence, and has at least one foreign parent” (p. 894). One of the overall main interests of this research project was to investigate the similarities and potential differences in the accounts

of native Greek and young adults of the second generation of (im)migrants regarding work and precarity, a task we do not address in this paper.

vi) It is essential to address reflexively this power asymmetry, since it affects the positioning and accounting in the local context, as well as the constructions of precarity. The interviewer and the interviewees were of similar age, sharing the same language and similar conditions of living and working in crisis and precarity. Nevertheless, the difference in socio-cultural background, the country of origin for the participants of the second generation (as the interviewer was native Greek), educational level, as well as gender, proved to be meaningful differences for the power dynamics of the interview; most notably, it is argued that it effected the management of accountability for being effortful or not (Gibson, 2009, 2011) in precarious conditions of work.

vii) "Pocket-money" ("*hartziliki*" in Greek) is a term used in Greek language to denote a temporary money-gift, accorded by an older person, usually parent, to a minor or a child dependent on that generosity, not gained rightfully through labour.

viii) The concept of 'banalization', as used in this analysis, derives theoretically from Arendt's (2010) notion of 'banality of evil', as well as from Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism'. Dejours (1998) has suggested, in a psycho-analytically informed fashion, that the concept of banalization refers to the personal distress and suffering brought upon the workers by conditions of precarity, once that distress cannot be articulated, shared, vocalized. Hence, as a concept, banalization is employed here to highlight that precarious conditions of work for the young participants have become so common-place (Billig, 1987) that they have become a lived ideology (Billig, 1995; Billig et al., 1988) for Greek society, a commonly shared and intelligible knowledge; so much so that participants don't bother to stress them in an interview, hence they are 'banalized'. This notion is a theoretical resource mobilized hermeneutically in order to analyse the management of accountability in the local context, hence it brings forth the link between the macro-social and micro-interactional context.

ix) Another idiomatic expression in need of careful translation. Dennis literally states "Well, this thing now!"; in Greek "*Kala, ayto tora!*". This expression can be attributed in English as "as if!", indicating the impossibility and out of common sense condition of providing insurance to a teenage worker.

x) As Waldinger and Feliciano (2004) note, "the advent of the hourglass economy confronts the immigrant children with a cruel choice: either acquire the college, and other advanced degrees needed to move into the professional/managerial elite, or else accept the same menial jobs to which the first generation was consigned" (p. 377).

xi) On further interpretative analysis, we could argue that the inherent traits of lack of organization and control serve to frame the labour market as orientalist (Bozatzis, 1999; Herzfeld, 1987), while also positioning the speaker's agency as occidental (Carrier, 1995). It could be suggested that as a young person, he is positioning himself within the dilemma of Greek national identity, looking to the East or the West (Bozatzis, 1999). This dilemma, as the recent attributions of the debt crisis insinuate, definitely touches upon the work regime in Greece. Hard work or idle days? In this dilemma, Alexis in opting in his accounting for the former, hard work.

xii) Dimitra is using this idiomatic phrase in Greek: "*xefrago ambeli*", translated here literally as "fenceless vineyard", which can also be translated in English as "open gates allotment".

xiii) Dimitra is using the phrase in Greek: "*bros gremos kai piso rema*", which literally could be translated as "in front of you there is the cliff, behind you there is the stream". In English, it could be translated as a "catch-22".

xiv) Hall and O'Shea (2013, p. 1) draw on Gramsci (1971) to define common sense as "a form of 'everyday thinking' which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of 'the common people' for practical guidance and advice".

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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